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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 6280
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3952
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3811
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4524
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4421

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000231

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/21/2020

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: HARE KRISHNA LEADER VISITS AFTER
TWELVE YEAR WAIT

REF: 09 ASHGABAT 691

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) On February 22, poloff met with visiting Hare Krishna spiritual leader Govinder Swami to discuss the situation of religious freedom in Turkmenistan. Based in India, Govinder Swami is responsible for Hare Krishna groups in Central Asia, Tatarstan and Mauritius. He spends a few months each year in Kazakhstan. The last time he visited Turkmenistan was in 1998. He recounted that during that trip, at a meeting held in an apartment, three government officials arrived and took down all the participants' names and identity information. The next day, all who were students and government employees were dismissed from their positions. Govinder's name was placed on a black list that barred his return. Despite repeated attempts to visit again throughout the ensuing years, he was only now granted permission. Neither he nor local Krishna followers could offer a reason why he was allowed to enter Turkmenistan at this time.

2. (C) Earlier on the same day, Govinder Swami met with the Deputy Chairman of the State Commission on Religious Affairs (CRA), Nury Gurbanov. Govinder Swami said the meeting went well, and that Gurbanov expressed satisfaction with the local, registered Krishna Society, saying he "liked" the group. Gurbanov reportedly mentioned that some unregistered religious groups break the law, and launched into an unprompted condemnation of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Govinder Swami expressed surprise to poloff about these remarks. Local Hare Krishna leader Vitaly Yefremovtsev, who also attended the CRA meeting, said he had been somewhat concerned in advance about the meeting, but was extremely pleased with how it turned out. When Gurbanov asked whether there was anything the Hare Krishnas need, Govinder Swami mentioned that he would like to be able to visit the Ashgabat group 3-4 times per year. Gurbanov raised no objection.

3. (C) In the meeting with poloff, Govinder Swami said he had earlier asked the local Krishna group whether they had any needs or problems. They had not informed him of any problems. Yefremovtsev mentioned that the group would like to be able to acquire property for its temple, as opposed to the current uncertainty of rental premises. They said they

did not raise this issue at the CRA meeting.

14. (C) COMMENT: Allowing the foreign Hare Krishna leader to visit is a positive development and follows a couple of other such visits by foreign religious leaders during the past six months. The Krishna Society is probably a CRA favorite because of its extremely low profile, tucked away in the non-descript residence at the end of a dead-end street with no public visibility. Failing to mention the registered group's desire to own property during the CRA meeting was a missed opportunity, although not having any complaints no doubt kept them in Gurbanov's good graces. END COMMENT.
CURRAN